

Don Briggs, 1940-2019

Don Briggs was born on August 28, 1940. He grew up in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, near Denver. During World War II, Briggs' father produced bullets and ammunition. His father left his family when Briggs was six years old. His mother worked as a bookkeeper. Growing up, Briggs spent much of his time fishing on the headwaters of the Colorado River in Rocky Mountain National Park, playing on his grandparents' farm, and traveling with his aunt and uncle. He played football in junior high and basketball at Wheat Ridge High School. After graduating from high school, he went on to attend Colorado State University (formerly Colorado Agricultural and Mechanical School) in Fort Collins in 1958, where he played intramural sports.

Briggs graduated from CSU in 1963. While working at a ski resort in Winter Park, he and a few friends heard that Mammoth Lakes got huge amounts of snow, and so they all quit their jobs to move to California. During a trip to the Bay Area, Briggs visited an old college girlfriend, Susan Barbour, who was living in San Francisco and working as a flight attendant for Pan American Airlines. He and Barbour decided to get married in Colorado. They then moved back to San Francisco, where Briggs drove trucks for United Parcel. In 1964, the couple had saved up enough money to travel around the world, visiting Germany, Jordan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, and Japan. It was during this trip that Briggs first took up amateur photography.

After their world trip, the Briggs moved back to Colorado, where he worked for the state of Colorado as a highway engineer. Both enjoyed backpacking and fishing. In 1966, they joined the Sierra Club. At that point, the Sierra Club was protesting the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam. Briggs' wife Susan Barbour suggested that they should go see the Grand Canyon if they were going to be involved in its conservation. On their grueling June 1966 Bright Angel trail hike, they met a group of river runners from the American River Touring Association (ARTA). The Briggs decided that they would go on a river trip themselves the next summer.

Don Briggs was 27 years old when he and his wife Susan took their first eight-day trip down the Colorado River in a motor boat in 1967. Their head boatman was Rob Elliott, who told the couple that only about 3,000 people had gone down the river at the

time. Briggs was enraptured by the other river runners, who he would go on to document in his photographs and films. He told Lew Steiger in an interview, “It’s like I’m two different people. Before Grand Canyon and after Grand Canyon.”

Returning from the river, Briggs narrowly avoided being drafted to serve in the Vietnam War. Shortly thereafter, he was fired from his job as a highway engineer for having long hair. He worked on a survey crew in the foothill of Denver for a short time before he re-encountered Rob Elliott, who had moved to Colorado to work for Outward Bound and avoid being drafted himself. Elliott invited Briggs to join him as a river runner with the American River Touring Association (ARTA). Briggs initially declined. After he and Barbour divorced around 1970, he began planning a trip to Nepal for 1971. Before arranging his travel, he called Elliott, who was back in California, to ask if he could still get a job with ARTA. Elliott agreed.

Following a trip to Acapulco, Mexico, Briggs moved to Flagstaff in 1971. He started working with ARTA as an assistant to boatmen Alan Wilson and Richard Neilson. At first, this meant running the river in motorboats before ARTA switched to oar power boats around 1972. During his ARTA trips in the Grand Canyon, Briggs took photographs of his fellow river runners and of the Colorado River itself. [ONE MORE LINE]

In 1972, Briggs ran the Stanislaus River in California during a spring training for ARTA California. He and his fellow river runners soon learned that there was a plan for the Army Corp of Engineers to dam the Stanislaus. Briggs got involved with campaigns to fight against the New Melones Dam put on by a new organization called Friends of the River, alongside people like Mark Dubois. For several years, Briggs split his time between Arizona, going down the Grand Canyon with ARTA during the river running season, and California, where he worked to protect the Stanislaus River by making billboards and banners, collecting petition signatures, lawsuits, and direct lobbying in Washington DC. In 1974, he created a 7.5 minute montage film which showed Friends of the River’s campaign activities in Los Angeles, set to the song “L.A. Woman” by the Doors. The film focused on efforts to collect signatures in support of Proposition 17, a ballot initiative which attempted to save the Stanislaus from flooding by New Melones Dam. Prop 17 failed, but Friends of the River’s activism did not end there.

‘Dips Trips’ in 1973?’

Around 1975, Briggs moved to Oakland, California, where he initially rented a room in Elliot’s apartment along with Elliot’s first wife, Susan Royal, and his daughter, Anthea Elliot. He spent his winters in New York City to promote his photography and visit media people he knew from ARTA, like Michael Winn, Jack Schneider, and Miriam Golden. After Proposition 17 failed, Friends of the River tried to prevent the dam from being filled. Briggs was asked to help them get media coverage during his trips to New York. Though his initial efforts at PR largely failed to pan out, Briggs subsequently became involved in efforts to protect the Tuolumne River as well as other rivers in central California slated to be dammed. Together with Bill Center, Larry Orman, and Ron Pickup, he put together a traveling slide exhibit called "Condemned Rivers of the Motherlode" which featured the Tuolumne, American, and Stanislaus Rivers. The exhibit was shown at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. in 1977.ⁱ

Briggs’ photographic career ran in parallel to his conservation efforts in California, lasting from roughly 1971 to 1980. He had his first one-man show at the Grand Canyon National Park Center in 1975, going on to exhibit his work at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco (1976), the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, the Scottsdale Center for the Arts (1978), the Nikon Gallery and Davis & Long Gallery in New York City (both 1977), the Monterey Art Museum (1980), the Canon Salon in Tokyo (1979), and the Boston Museum of Science (1976), among other locations. Between 1978 and 1982, the Visitor Center at the South Rim of Grand Canyon Park hosted a “permanent” exhibit of his photographs. His photographs were published in magazines like *National Geographic*, *Audubon*, *National Wildlife Federation*, *Sierra*, *Outside*, and *Arizona Highways*, as well as newspapers including the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Meanwhile, the battle over the future of the Stanislaus River continued even after the New Melones Dam was completed in 1978. In the spring of 1979, Friends of the River co-director Mark Dubois decided to chain himself to a boulder in the riverbed as a final act of protest against further flooding of the Stanislaus River canyon. Briggs agreed to coordinate the press response on behalf of Friends of the River. He and another person known as “Deep Paddle” would take journalists to see Dubois in his undisclosed

location. That same year, Briggs volunteered to make a film to support Friends of the River which included footage of Dubois' protest. With the help of freelance filmmakers Kenji Yamamoto and Tim Ayers of Pier 42 in San Francisco, Briggs produced and directed his first long documentary film, *Parrott's Ferry is the Limit*. The film focused on the negative social, cultural, and economic impacts of New Melones Dam and the importance of the Stanislaus River to various communities in California.

Briggs made several short films between 1982 and 1987, including *Wet Shorts* (1982) for Nickelodeon; *Waterborne* (1984), partially funded by Mary Louise Davis; *Beach Bully Babylon* (1984), directed by Dave Edwards; and *Dreamers Holiday* (1987) for Arizona Raft Adventures (AZRA), Rob Elliot's ARTA spin-off rafting company based solely in the Grand Canyon. He also produced several narrated slideshows and films in support of other conservation efforts, including *Cut 'Em Down, Cut 'Em Down* for Save the Redwoods, a slide show in support of the Desert Protection Act, and *Nastochia* (1988) for the Mountain Lion Foundation. His footage was also used in *Grand Canyon: Amphitheater of the Gods* (1987), a film produced by Reader's Digest.

In 1987, Briggs completed *River Song: A Natural History*, a 40-minute film narrated by Richard Chamberlain which explored the natural history of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. *River Song* was produced by the Grand Canyon Natural History Association. The film won numerous awards at film festivals including the Banff Film Festival, Columbus Film Festival, and New York International Film Festival. [[Any more on this film?](#)]

[[Find out more about this...Grand Canyon Mule Ride: or, Is There a Dining Car on the Mule Train? \(1992?\) In association with the Fred Harvey Company.](#)]

Briggs' most popular film, *River Runners of the Grand Canyon* (1994), premiered at the Friends of the River Festival in San Francisco in 1995. The film featured contemporary river runners like Georgie White Clark, Katie Lee, and Martin Litton, political figures like Robert Kennedy and Barry Goldwater, and other notable people historically associated with river running on the Colorado River, including the Kolb Brothers, Norman (Norm) Nevills, Bert Loper, Louis Jotter, and others. [[Any reviews/sales info we have?](#)]

In 1997, Briggs and his friend [Joe ?](#) edited his remaining Grand Canyon footage to produce a film visualizing Ferde Grofé's 1931 composition "Grand Canyon Suite." The

film, *Grand Canyon Suite*, was played during several special performances, including the Boise Symphony Orchestra (1999), Cleveland Philharmonic (1999), San Francisco Symphony (?), and the Flagstaff Symphony Orchestra in 2012.

In the late 1990s, Don began work on a film about Martin Litton, but this work was never completed.

In the early 2000s, Don moved from his houseboat in Marin County, to a supportive living home in Sacramento. Don died September 15, 2019 in Sacramento, California. He is survived by his former wife, Susan, and his daughter, Lucy.

Information provided in this biographical history is based upon collection materials, as well as a 2003 oral history interview with Don Briggs by Lew Steiger for the River Runners Oral History Project. Additional information from Briggs' obituary and the article "Fork in Career Leads to River Movie" by Paul McHugh, San Francisco Chronicle, April 10, 1995. <https://www.stanislausriver.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/1995Fork-in-Career-Leads-to-River-Movie.pdf>

ⁱ <https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/condemned-rivers-mother-lode-event-exhib-5699?width=85%25&height=85%25&iframe=true&destination=node/34388%3Fpage%3D185%26sort%3Dclosing>